




A fifth-grade class at the Saugus (Calif.) Union School District is working on a writing assignment using social networking. The district is leading an ambitious plan to rethink writing instruction and pedagogy in the schools.

The New *Writing* Pedagogy

Using social networking tools to keep up with student interests.

By Angela Pascopella and Will Richardson



CORY WAS A SPECIAL EDUCATION SIXTH-GRADER AT THE SAUGUS (Calif.) Union School District when he wrote an entry on his blog page entitled “The Spied Enemies: A War Journal.” This make-believe story opens with the words “I am Johnny Willow, a hero to some people. I will tell you my story about my adventures in World War II.”

Cory, who posted the story in the fall of 2007, states how Willow hears Japanese planes flying over Pearl Harbor and then dropping bombs, specifically on the USS Arizona. “I saw everything start to become blurry. I woke up in front of the captain. He said, ‘You are lucky to be alive.’”

Because Cory was in a class that used social networking tools for writing—specifically Elgg, an open source media platform—other students, teachers, family members and even the general public were able to comment on his story. For example, an “army colonel,” who did not give a name, said about chapter 1, “Your words have painted a very vivid picture. You did an excellent job of illustrating the terror of war. Keep up the good work.”

Cory is now an eighth-grader and no longer in special education classes, says Jim Klein, the district’s director of information services and technology, who helped push the idea of using social networking for writing in the district’s schools about five years ago. Klein attributes Cory’s transformation to the story he wrote and the positive comments he received. “Suddenly, Cory is not an outcast,” Klein says, noting the positive feedback Cory received and the self-confidence that resulted. “It changed his perspective on life. And he has friends now.”

It’s been almost 40 years since the teaching of writing in schools had its last major shift, a move to an emphasis on the “writing process,” which still holds sway in most classrooms today. But with the advent of Web-based social networking tools like blogs and wikis, YouTube and Facebook, it may be that the next revision of writing pedagogy is upon us, one that emphasizes digital spaces, multimedia texts, global audiences and linked conversations among passionate readers.

Moving to a new pedagogy is not easy for many district administrators, however, as the Web as a writing space is still primarily an unknown, scary place to put students. But as research is showing, students are flocking to online networks in droves, and they are doing a great deal of writing there already, some of it creative and thoughtful and inspiring, but much of it outside the traditional expectations of “good writing” that classrooms require. The ePals Global Community is just one “learning space” example

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that has connections spanning 200 countries and territories. With ePals Learning Space, which is a virtual workspace to create, share and manage educational content, students, who are interacting with peers, and educators can take part in project-based learning in a collaborative and controlled environment. How we begin to teach students to flourish in these more complex, online social spaces is a fundamental question many schools are beginning to tackle, not necessarily because they want to but because they realize the very nature of writing is changing.

That change is spelled out clearly by the National Council of Teachers of English, which last year published “new literacies” for readers and writers in the 21st century. Among those literacies are the ability to “build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally,” to “design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes,” and to “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts.” Very little of that kind of work is possible to achieve without expanding the way we think about writing instruction in the context of online social tools.

Writing for Audiences

Dave Childers, principal of the Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership, a charter high school in Fresno, Calif., just started to use social networking in his school but now feels the time is coming when teaching in digitally connected workspaces will be required and not a “luxury.” According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life Project study, 85 percent of youths aged 12-17 engage at least occasionally in some form of electronic personal communication, which includes text messaging, sending e-mail or instant messages, or posting comments on social networking sites. In other words, our students aren’t waiting for us to teach them the ins and outs of writing in these digital spaces.

“Using online writing tools will allow



Freshmen at the Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership in Fresno, Calif., take tips from social media strategist Peter Lang and his staff, who are helping the students set up their own Facebook pages and school blogs, laying the groundwork for what teachers will be building on with the students.

students to write whenever and wherever they feel inspired, and to be able to speak to an audience that is larger and more important to them than the traditional classroom,” Childers says. “There is a reason why we should constantly be looking for ways to incorporate more innovative writing opportunities into our curriculum.”

Key to this rethinking process is articulating these shifts throughout the K12

of Salt Lake City, says students still need to be taught how to navigate online environments. Facebook and MySpace, for example, do a “good job” of connecting people socially, but they shouldn’t be the extent of students’ online presence, he says.

“That is a big fear for me—that we are inadequately preparing our youth for the future,” he says. “I think that the kind of research, learning and jobs of the very near

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—Dave Childers, principal, Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership, Fresno, Calif.

curriculum, across all disciplines, as well as providing professional development opportunities for teachers to begin to explore writing in these online spaces as well.

“The shape of writing has changed,” agrees Troy Hicks, author of the recently released book *The Digital Writing Workshop* and assistant professor of English and director of the Chippewa River Writing Project at Central Michigan University. “Kids are now writing for real audiences and for real purposes, not just other kids in the class or the refrigerator door. And they are composing on computers and on phones in text and multimedia. These are substantial changes.”

Pockets of Social Networking

Chris Sloan, an English teacher and media adviser at Judge Memorial Catholic High School, a college prep school in the Diocese

future will increasingly require people to collaborate from a distance.”

Sloan, who teaches AP English literature, has his students do inquiry-based writing, which incorporates what they’re reading both online and in books. And he uses Youth Voices (www.youthvoices.net), an online space where teachers and students create multimodal compositions via formats such as text and video. “Students need to be able to find sources, critically examine them and communicate effectively to the larger group,” he says. “My goal is to inspire students to better themselves as writers, but more importantly, as people. I want my students to be active participants in our democracy, and knowing how to access and deal with the vast amounts of information available is a key skill.”

Sloan and Paul Allison, who teaches sophomore and junior English in the East

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West School of International Studies, which is part of the New Visions network of small schools in Flushing, N.Y., collaborate and build curriculum and wiki pages together on the Youth Voices site. And every Wednesday evening, through EdTechTalk (www.edtechtalk.com), teachers across the nation and in the East West School stay in touch via webcasting. They may hold a virtual staff meeting in which they interview software developers for upcoming programs they might want and hash out issues of online learning, says Allison, who is also the technology coordinator for the New York City Writing Project. The project's goal is to improve the teaching and learning of language and literacy in New York City public schools by increasing teachers' abilities to use writing as a tool for learning, thinking and communicating.

Allison started using social networking in his classes about six years ago when he met two other educators in a summer workshop. They set up a blog site to get the three classes of students communicating with one another. They now use Drupal, which gives educators choices. The whole world can see and comment on writings from students, but educators can close or open any individual post they want. Allison can also determine if he only wants other teachers or administrators to see the site.

"My students are writing things that they are passionate about and willing to stick with and do research on and talk to other students about," he says. For example, one of his students wrote a blog post about abolishing school uniforms. "I don't think he would have written it if he wrote for the school newspaper," Allison explains. "So it's like quasi-school. But it's what he wants to write about. And he'll get responses from kids in Boston and Utah."

The students can write about books they are reading and even make MP3 files—for example, recording four minutes of a synopsis of a book—that they post on their blog. They also post Twitter-like updates a few times a week.

Grammar and spelling are not em-

A PIONEER OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

A California IT director leads his district in rethinking writing instruction and pedagogy.

JIM KLEIN, DIRECTOR OF INFORMATION SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGY AT THE SAUGUS (Calif.) Union School District, is leading an ambitious plan to rethink how writing is taught in his schools. It's centered not just on social tools but on planning for and executing writing in multimedia as well.

"We use social media tools across the curriculum from as early as first grade," Klein says, citing student use of blogs to write and publish podcasts and other presentations on SlideShare. "Writing is at the center of all of their activities, regardless of the delivery mechanism, and the process is often structured to produce a collaborative result."

Klein started using social networking, specifically Elgg, in his district in 2005. Elgg is student-centered and "eliminates boundaries," Klein says, which means students in any grade can read what other students are doing in other grades, and anyone can respond. But teachers have their own blogs and their own lessons under their own accounts, which keeps students focused. They also have their own separate social network, or "personal learning network," in which to share and collaborate with other teachers.

Any comments from anyone, including students and outsiders, are read first by the teacher to ensure they contain nothing inappropriate, threatening or vulgar, Klein says. He recalls a few instances where comments had to be blocked, but they were more from peers or a family member. For example, rude comments made by an "older brother being obnoxious to his little brother" would not be posted, he says.

During the 2007-2008 school year, a graduate student conducted a study of student writing online that showed fifth-grade students "were more motivated to write and thought better of their own writing," Klein says.

In 2008-2009, the district also implemented SWATTEC, or Student Writing Achievement Through Technology Enhanced Collaboration, a program that targets fourth-grade writing, information literacy and Internet skills in a technology-rich environment. Every fourth-grader received an ASUS Eee netbook and used social media tools and Vantage Learning's MyAccess evaluation software for learning. As a result of a newfound motivation to write generated by increased access to 21st-century tools, test results showed a 24 percent increase in English language arts scores from 2008 to 2009, with 79 percent of fourth-graders scoring proficient.

Now about half of the teachers in grades 1 through 6 use social networking in their classes. Not every teacher is comfortable or wants to use it, Klein says.

Klein sees himself as a pioneer of sorts. "We always talked about it as a learning environment, not a social network," he says. "We take advantage of teachable moments."

phasized, because the focus is on communicating with peers in fast microposts, but Allison says he works with students to self-assess and then eventually grades the bigger discussion pieces that include quotes from many different online resources and multimedia.

In the Crossing to College group, senior students can communicate with college students, who can explain the difference between writing in high school and writing in college. "It's about a real audience," Allison says.

Childers of the Academy for Civic and Entrepreneurial Leadership in California has a new plan to include writing in the

school's curriculum, with as much of it as possible online using tools such as Google Docs, student blogs and possibly Twitter. "I think that if we are going to live in a digital age, we have to reassess everything that we are teaching in schools to see if there is a digital component or vehicle that is available to utilize," says Childers.

Making Connections

In these online spaces, students and educators write not just to communicate but to connect. Whereas publishing was once the end point in the writing process, it is now a midpoint, the place where the interaction with readers and subsequent conversations

begin through comments on or revisions and linking. Sharing one's writing with a potential global audience is a means to creating networks of learners who share an interest or passion. Their interactions can continue for a lifetime. But while this sharing creates all sorts of opportunities for students, it also creates a new level of complexity that requires they become adept at navigating a more transparent life online and at managing a much more distributed conversation that is carried on asynchronously in many different places. Figuring out how to help students manage those shifts is, in large measure, where schools are struggling right now.

Collaboration and Risks

That collaborative aspect is another important shift to consider, as the Web continues to facilitate more and more opportunities for people to create together. Tools such as AppJet's EtherPad, a Web-based word processor that allows people to work together in real time, Diigo, a research tool and knowledge-sharing community, and wikis

provide spaces for students to roll up their writing sleeves and create together—an act that, again, adds another layer of complexity to the writing process but one that most see as an important skill moving forward. That has implications for every teacher.

“How can a math teacher ignore the collaborative potentials of having kids work in a Google spreadsheet?” Hicks asks. “That’s writing too. Collaboration on almost every level is just a part of the equation today.”

So what are the risks to moving students to these networked, online writing spaces and allowing them to share their work with global audiences? As with any interaction online, there is always a chance for an inappropriate response or a connection with someone who may not be who he seems.

But the research has shown that these occurrences are rare and manageable, especially with a well-prepared plan for the use of these technologies and with teachers who understand the potentials as well as the pitfalls of working online. As Klein says, you need to be prepared. “Social media, as with all things public, present risks,” he says.

“School leaders need to not only understand these risks but also to have a plan to mitigate them.” In Klein’s case, that means providing teachers with the tools necessary to maintain complete oversight of what’s occurring online, a “necessary step” for younger students who are being prepared to move into more public spaces online. It also means counseling teachers about the legal implications of inappropriate use and having a clear policy, which parents sign off on, that covers both in-school and out-of-school use of social tools.

Worth the Effort?

Still, is this shift in pedagogy and policy worth the effort? Will sound, traditional writing instruction still suffice, or do we need to reframe the way we teach students to write due to the global, online spaces they will frequent more in their lives?

In an August 2009 *Wired* article, Andrea Lunsford, professor of writing and rhetoric at Stanford University, offered her own research to suggest that students are writing in environments far removed ►



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—Kurt Eisele-Dyrli

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from those from even a generation ago. "I think we're in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven't seen since Greek civilization," she says. According to her five-year study of student writing, technology is pushing writing literacy in new directions that educators must begin to make sense of. "What we do is not for everybody," says Allison in New York. "And it's essential that teachers are not asking questions and getting kids to respond. It's about getting kids to come up with their own questions and doing their own research and posing questions and having students respond to them. It's a kind of curriculum and approach to curriculum that if you're ready for it, you get excited about it."

Allison says using social networking to write is not a "silver bullet," and students who normally struggle to write are still struggling. Still, these students try harder, because they know it is going public and others are watching. "I think it's a good challenge and one they should face," Allison says.

Hicks believes that "inviting students to create, share, and respond to digital writing" such as blog posts, wiki pages, electronic portfolios, podcasts, and more means they are learning how to compose various texts, with different media, for audiences and purposes within and beyond classrooms. "Teaching with social media can help them learn more than just how to use technology," Hicks says. "It can help them develop into critical and creative readers and writers as they learn how to communicate with other students, teachers, experts and outside audiences." DA

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